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Building a Culture of Hope: Exploring Implicit Biases Against Poverty

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Building a Culture of Hope: Exploring Implicit Biases Against Poverty

Abstract

A Culture of Hope provides a blueprint for schools wanting to meet the social/emotional needs of youth at risk. In working with staff to develop cultures of hope, the influence of implicit biases and prejudices about people who are living in poverty must be addressed. This essay introduces information and research about implicit biases, illustrates the impact of implicit biases on teaching and learning, and shares strategies for raising awareness about implicit biases against poverty in order to build staff consensus around core beliefs and values.

Keywords

implicit biases, poverty, culture of hope, social and emotional learning

Building a Culture of Hope: Exploring Implicit Biases Against Poverty

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Meeting the needs of youth placed at risk due to the impacts of poverty is one of the most critical, challenging tasks confronting public schools in the United States. Children living in impoverished communities across this nation experience a wide variety of challenges, including poor nutrition and health care, family mobility, and toxic stress. In school, they often face additional obstacles of bullying, class prejudice, racial prejudice, low teacher expectations, weak curriculum, and having the least experienced/least capable teachers (Barr & Gibson, 2013; Gorski, 2013; Jensen, 2009). The effects of these experiences are further amplified or exacerbated by unconscious, implicit biases about poverty (Flannery, 2015). This article seeks to illustrate the urgent need for addressing implicit biases surrounding poverty and to share strategies for helping school personnel confront their own personal beliefs and biases in order to break unconscious “habits of prejudice” that may be placing students at risk (Godsil, 2015) instead of fostering their resilience and amplifying their strengths. The goal is to clear a path for staff to build a school-wide set of unified beliefs and core values related to reaching and teaching all students and especially youth considered at risk.

REALITY OF POVERTY IN OUR COMMUNITIES

In more and more communities, schools are all but overwhelmed by poverty. In Vancouver, Washington, for example, the poverty rate in the 13 highest poverty schools has risen from 25% 20 years ago, to 62% today (Parrish, 2015). Over

2,300 K–12 students in Vancouver experienced homelessness during the 2015–2016 school year, an increase of 112% in one district (Parrish, 2016). In Clark County, Washington, it is not unusual for some neighborhood schools to have up to 90% of families living below the poverty level (Parrish, 2015). Low-incomes, unemployment, and homelessness come to characterize these neighborhoods, creating a negative, reinforcing loop. Sadly, southwest Washington is not unique—these statistics represent the norm for communities across the United States.

Those living in the lowest socio-economic class tend to work for minimum wage, and even with a full time job or two, may be unable to rise above the poverty level (UC Davis Center for Poverty Research, 2016). A single parent with two children would need to work 50 hours a week at the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour just to keep above the poverty level (UC Davis Center for Poverty Research, 2016). As of November, 2016, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported 5.5 million unemployed who currently want a job, and nearly 2 million without jobs who are “discouraged workers,” no longer looking for work. This speaks of a population of people who are unable to provide for their families and who, after years of struggling to find work, have given up (Eberstadt, 2016).

If the American dream of upward mobility is not dead, it is on life support and the prognosis is grim. Young adults can no longer expect they will do as well as or better than their parent’s

generation (Putnam, 2015). According to the Harris Poll on Unemployed Americans (2016), one third of all unemployed adults are 18–29 years old, but those with more education were less likely to be unemployed. The primary, if not only, hope for a better life in America depends on a high quality education beyond a high school diploma. Tragically, for poor and minoritized students in public schools in the United States, achieving this necessary, high-quality education is fraught with mostly systemic, institution-created challenges.

Living in poverty can foster a “learned helplessness” that can all but overwhelm both adults and children (Beaumont, 2009; Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993). In school, learned helplessness can impact student learning in powerful, negative ways. Helplessness can lead to surrender, to an unwillingness to even try. Over time, helplessness can evolve into hopelessness, apathy, anger, and indolence. Additionally, many people living in poverty, especially generational poverty, internalize an external locus of control characterized by the belief that they are powerless to change their own lives (Dalton, Ghosal, & Mani, 2011). Instead, an external force, an external “other” or “them,” has power over their lives (Rotter, 1966).

Children living in poverty may arrive at school somewhat academically and socially behind peers who attended quality daycares and preschools, but quality schools and teachers can catch students up by the end of the primary years. Unfortunately, a steady stream of new tasks, frequent correction, and negative feedback instills in some children a belief that they cannot learn, that they cannot “do this”—“this” being school. Without intense and focused efforts to redirect learned helplessness, instill an internal locus of control, and avoid permanently labeling students, educators may unintentionally cause students to fall even further behind as they continue through the grades (Barr & Gibson, 2013). Each year, 1 million capable students end up failing, faltering, and ultimately leaving

school as dropouts (Child Trends Databank, 2015).

Statistics show that youth who drop out of school are no more effective or successful outside school walls. Dropouts are unqualified for 90% of all jobs in the U.S. (Child Trends Databank, 2015). Unable to find secure employment, many turn to illegal activities that lead to incarceration—75% of all crimes are committed by dropouts (Child Trends Databank, 2015). Dropout rates are unequal across racial, ethnic, and socio-economic demographics (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewelRamani, 2011; Child Trends Databank, 2015). Many communities talk about the “school to prison pipeline” that leads directly from failing schools to prison cells. As mentioned above, the single best hope for families living in poverty is education. It is increasingly the only pathway that can lead to a better life, a better future.

POVERTY AND LEARNING: FIRST AND SECOND WAVE RESEARCH

In the first wave of research on poverty and learning during the 1990s and early 2000s, studies of high-poverty/high-performing schools provided specific, concrete strategies that have proven successful in closing the racial, ethnic, and socio-economic achievement gaps, resulting in tens of thousands of new high-performing schools (e.g., Barr & Parrett, 2007). These strategies focused primarily on classroom instruction, school curriculum, and school practices and policies, such as having high-quality curriculum, ensuring best practices are used for instruction, and using data to track student progress. Replication of these strategies led to improvement of thousands of ineffective and failing schools, but many schools and districts that worked to turn their schools around came up short and failed to close the achievement gaps (Bromberg & Theokas, 2013). As of 2014, over a million students still attend “dropout factories,” schools with less than 60% graduation rates (Aldeman, 2015).

Sadly, minoritized and low-income students disproportionately attend these dropout factories.

Researchers, recognizing the complexity of poverty and learning, continued to expand their understanding of the essential characteristics of a high-poverty/high-performing school in a “second wave” of research that continues to this day. Researchers reexamined schools studied during the first wave, turning toward the social/emotional needs of students, especially those living in poverty (e.g., Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2007; Jensen, 2009). Today, there is a much greater understanding of the impact of stress and trauma on the brain’s development and student behavior, as documented in the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). The ability of educators and other caring adults to dramatically counter the effects of trauma is also well documented (Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, n.d.). Addressing the social and emotional needs of students is of critical importance for effective classroom instruction (Adams, 2013; Sparks, 2013).

BUILDING A CULTURE OF HOPE

Our research in schools across the country supports the second wave of research: school culture has a tremendous positive role in helping youth at risk find great success in and out of school. Students impacted by poverty absolutely can achieve high levels of academic excellence, graduate from high school, and find a pathway to a positive future. Yet, to accomplish these essential goals, schools must surround these students with a positive educational atmosphere, overcome helplessness with optimism, instill an internal locus of control, and replace despair with hope. What is needed, what is required, is a school Culture of Hope (Barr & Gibson, 2013). Schools have created such a Culture of Hope by helping students develop four “seeds

of hope” that can transform the helplessness of being poor in the United States into a personal optimism for the future.

The four seeds of hope identified in our research are Optimism, Place and Belonging, Pride and Self-Esteem, and Purpose and Passion. Optimism is the hope for the future an individual has and the belief in one’s capability to achieve that future. Place and Belonging is the connection to others and to place held by an individual. Pride and Self-Esteem is the self-confidence and value individuals hold for themselves, their family, their heritage, and their school and classroom. Purpose and Passion is what gives an individual motivation and drive to meet short-term goals and achieve long-term aspirations.

Together, the seeds of hope provide a path for combating learned helplessness and hopelessness by empowering individuals. A thorough discussion of the seeds of hope, along with examples of how different schools across the United States have implemented these seeds of hope at all levels, can be found in *Building a Culture of Hope* (Barr & Gibson, 2013), as well as in our previous article for the *National Youth-At-Risk Journal*, “Building a Culture of Hope for Youth At Risk: Supporting Learners with Optimism, Place, Pride, and Purpose” (Gibson & Barr, 2015).

One of the most fundamental tasks for building a Culture of Hope and developing and improving high-poverty/high-performing schools is ensuring that the school personnel share a set of common beliefs and core values. Within a school’s staff, individual beliefs can differ dramatically, even within a school faculty that has been carefully chosen and developed. As a result, rather than being surrounded with a powerful, unified message of high expectations and optimism, students can experience mixed messages that confuse and discourage them. Thus, the first step in creating school-wide consensus on a strong set of core beliefs and

values is to help teachers understand their conscious (explicit) and unconscious (implicit) beliefs and values.

According to Jensen (2016), “Our biases have been known to show up in our classrooms in study after study” (para. 1), yet most teachers claim they are not biased. Longitudinal studies tracking student achievement over time indicate teacher expectations are more important for student success than student motivation or student effort (Ingels et al., 2005). In a 2009 METLife survey of K–12 teachers, a strong majority agreed there is a strong relationship between teacher expectations and student learning, yet only a third believed all of their current students could achieve academic success and very few believed that all students are motivated to learn. If teacher expectations are a powerful predictor of student achievement, why do so many teachers’ expectations fail to provide that powerful boost to the students who need it most? It may be that implicit biases about race, gender, language, and socio-economic status are influencing teachers’ expectations (Flannery, 2015; Jensen, 2016).

IMPLICIT BIASES IN SCHOOLS

Implicit biases are unconscious beliefs, attitudes, or stereotypes, which influence our perceptions, words, and actions without our awareness (Kirwan Institute, 2016). Most implicit biases are learned over time, in families, schools, and communities. They come from the media, what we read, movies we watch, and listening to our friends talk. These are deep, unconscious beliefs that influence our actions and interpretations, and they are quite often inaccurate and may contradict our stated, conscious beliefs (Kirwan Institute, 2016). Implicit biases are often activated involuntarily, without an individual’s awareness or intentional control. Fortunately, implicit biases are highly malleable and can be unlearned through awareness and habitual reflectiveness.

The implications and effects of racial, ethnic, and income imbalances between school staffs and students are evident in discipline and achievement data and graduation statistics. If you are born black, brown, male, or poor, you are more likely to end up in jail than college after high school graduation (Child Trends Databank, 2015). The re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act calls on schools to seek out equity imbalances in schools through a rigorous, unflinching examination of data. Social equity movements like Black Lives Matter and La Raza further raise awareness of equity imbalances and both explicit and implicit biases. While these efforts are making a difference, the need for awareness of and elimination of implicit biases in our schools remains high (Flannery, 2015; Godsil, 2015)

Addressing implicit biases about poverty and classism is made more difficult because the idea that one can change his or her status in life with hard work is so deeply ingrained in the fabric of our nation, in the myth of the American dream. There is a mistaken belief that everyone living in America is provided an equal opportunity to succeed (Yahn, 2012). The implicit bias in this is if people just worked harder, they would not be poor. Poor children and families are unwittingly blamed for their poverty.

When students living in poverty arrive at school, they cross paths with middle class staff who may react with largely unconscious class prejudice and subtle racial biases, even if they themselves came from poverty or minoritized populations. Unaware of these biases, well-meaning teachers can misinterpret a student’s words and actions, confusing the student’s learned helplessness or trauma-based anxiety with disrespect or defiance. Students are labeled lazy, slovenly, hyperactive, aggressive, or indolent, with parents “who just don’t care.” In schools throughout the United States, it is often heard, “It is not the schools that are failing these students; it is their families.” Walk into almost

any school and you will likely hear statements like the following:

- “That student just doesn’t care about learning. Her parents don’t care, either. They didn’t come to her conference and haven’t returned my phone calls. They don’t even have their voice mail set up!”
- “Some of my students are just so lazy. They simply do not try. I had some of these kids’ older brothers and sisters and they were the same way.”
- “I am tired of working so hard, only to have to support people who don’t want to work. I think if they get something, they need to give something back. They have enough money to buy a cell phone, for goodness sakes!”
- Staff member: “This student is really struggling. She has a number of discipline referrals the last two weeks. What seems to be going on?” Other staff member: “It’s her parents. They are inconsistent and don’t set clear expectations.”
- Staff member: “Oh, he’s just naughty.” Other staff member: “He’s been that way since Kindergarten.” Original staff member, “His brother and sister are naughty, too.”

Comments like these, overheard in high-poverty schools across this country, reveal implicit biases about students and families who live in poverty and may explain the disparities revealed by the MetLife (2009) survey. These statements also reveal how the words we use may mean different things to different people: words like “naughty,” “lazy,” and “care.” It is critical to uncover what we, and others, mean by the words we use, as a way to tap into our unconscious beliefs. Thus, the single most important issue in developing a healthy, effective school and classroom-learning atmosphere becomes helping teachers understand their own private perceptions, prejudices, and biases.

The intention is not to blame or criticize educators, but to expose these beliefs so they can be interrupted. Since implicit biases are automatically activated, we can talk about these biases without needing to accuse people of being racist, classist, or sexist (Godsil, 2015; powell & Godsil, 2011). When we see that our decisions or behaviors are resulting in disparities, it is our duty to consider the impact of biases and transform them into ones that serve our students well, by de-biasing and breaking the prejudice habit (Godsil, 2015).

In regards to poverty, implicit biases serve to reinforce beliefs about the character, abilities, and priorities of families impacted by poverty, and influence how we interpret behavior. For example, if a student’s family does not come to the after-school art show, we might interpret this differently for a student with parents who are both doctors compared to a student whose parents are both unemployed. Our implicit biases might lead us to assume that the physician-parents are busy with important work *but still care about education*, while the unemployed parents are lazy and *do not care about education*.

What is important to understand is how implicit biases are basically unintentional, being a byproduct of the human brain’s mechanisms (Gershenson, 2015). In general, 98% of our brains work without our direct cognition, which means we consciously engage with 2% of our emotions and cognition. We process about 11 million bits of information at once, but only have conscious awareness of 40 bits (powell & Godsil, 2011). Our brains are hardwired to take massive amounts of sensory input, sort it quickly using schemas, and bring to our awareness the most important bits. Stereotypes, prejudices, and biases are ways the brain streamlines this sorting process. Unfortunately, many of the brain’s unconscious sorting methods lead to mistaken beliefs, which can have serious consequences for students and families. Discussing conscious and unconscious beliefs is critical to understanding the roots

of disparity and inequity in our schools and society (Banks & Ford, 2011; Grant-Thomas, 2011; Johnson, 2011).

SURVEYS AND STAFFS: RUNNING AGROUND

Through our ongoing work with schools implementing Cultures of Hope, we have come to recognize the enormous influence of implicit biases towards families impacted by poverty, especially generational poverty. Among the most well-meaning, hard-working educators, the influence of society, community, family, and personal experience instills often unspoken judgments and prejudices of others. Our full-day Culture of Hope sessions begin with a survey about beliefs, to help the staff initiate the process of coming to consensus on their core beliefs. (See survey used here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B6z-34PAY6G_YVBaeGpBSmswTFU/view?usp=sharing). After using this survey with school and school district staffs across this country, we find the responses are predictable, in three general categories.

The first category includes survey items that staff members generally agree on. Coming to consensus is typically achieved through brief, thoughtful discussion. This includes survey items like “All students benefit from education in the visual and performing arts” or “All children have talents and interests that can be developed.” These items are easy to unify behind, perhaps because they do not require any shifts in beliefs. They are, quite simply, statements that most everyone can agree to.

The second category holds survey items upon which staff members have less initial consensus. Coming to agreement on these items takes discussion and work, but is often accomplished in one session. Survey items like “All children can and will learn and achieve rigorous core academics” illustrate the contradiction between educators’ understanding of the importance of expectations for achievement and their failure to hold high expectations for all students (MetLife, 2009). Some staffs wish to re-write this item

to read “*Most* students can learn and achieve core academics.” This revision effectively takes schools off the hook for ensuring all students are expected to learn and achieve rigorous curriculum. We argue that it is imperative to say “All students” because then staff really must look at how they are serving or failing to serve all of their students. Using “most students” expects and accepts that some students will not be served in public schools. In order to be fierce about ensuring every student has access to the best education, all staff need to believe that ALL students should have it. Using “Most” instead of “All” provides an out, and leaves open the door for stereotypes and biases.

The third category consists of survey items that may tap into implicit biases. Coming to consensus on these items can be extremely challenging, requiring an investment of time and commitment. This includes survey items like, “Children who don’t eat breakfast at home have families who care about them.” Staff questioned the use of “care” and were able to give examples of what care means and how providing food is a basic of care. Another item in this third category includes “Every parent/guardian, no matter their circumstances, no matter what is on the surface, deeply loves their child(ren).” Staff objected to the use of “every” and “deeply loves,” citing examples of horrible circumstances and abusive families. Staff disagreements seemed to stem from their different interpretations of what care and love mean. Are care and love feelings or actions? Is it possible for a parent or guardian who is struggling with addiction and negatively impacting their child’s life to also love his or her child deeply? To come to consensus on items in this third category, a staff must dig in deep and look at their conscious and unconscious beliefs about families and poverty.

BELIEFS TO ACTIONS: WORDS MATTER

The power of beliefs is such that if we believe *all students can achieve, all students can learn, and all students will participate in extracurricular*

activities, then we are more likely to cause it to happen. This is why it is so critical to uncover our beliefs and build consensus as a staff about those beliefs. Our actions will come from those beliefs, and if we do not have consensus, our students and families will get mixed messages. For those who are living in poverty and most susceptible to learned helplessness and an external locus of control, it can only take one negative response or one negative experience to reinforce that mindset.

Educators' conscious and unconscious beliefs about students and their families shape their actions, which in turn shape and influence students' lives. No matter how unconscious our beliefs are, or how we try to mask them, our actions will make them clear, writ large in facial expressions and tones of voice. Thus, regardless of the reality of the situation, if I can believe that a parent/guardian loves his or her child and wants what is best for his or her child, I have a better chance of impacting the child's life positively because I will respond with a level of acceptance and connection that will foster a partnership with that family. Contrast this with approaching parents/guardians as if they are inadequate compared to other parents, that they are an addict or alcoholic, self-centered, un-educated, or do not really love their child. The best chance we have to positively impact a student is to build a connection with family members using empathy (not sympathy), a belief that they want to do right by their child but may not know how, and the understanding that they may be so bruised by their prior experiences in education that they will hear criticism in even the gentlest of suggestions.

REVEALING AND DEALING WITH IMPLICIT BIASES

In our work with school staffs and surveys, we have run headlong into implicit biases related to poverty. The main purpose of using these surveys is to help a school's administrative, certificated, and classified staff begin the process

of coming to consensus. We believe a valuable precursor to coming to consensus is to first build awareness of implicit biases related to poverty, and to then de-bunk those biases. Below is a list of six statements that reflect common implicit biases about children and families living in poverty. Please rate your agreement with these statements, using a scale of 1–4 (1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = often, and 4 = absolutely). Following this list are the research-supported conclusions, based on *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap* (Gorski, 2013).

Common Beliefs about Poverty:

- _____ 1. Children who grow up in poverty communicate poorly and use informal or non-standard English.
- _____ 2. Low-income parents value education less than middle-class parents.
- _____ 3. Parents living in poverty are attentive and involved in their children's lives.
- _____ 4. Children who grow up in poverty have parents who are hardworking and resourceful.
- _____ 5. Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to have parents or family members who are abusing drugs or alcohol.
- _____ 6. Parents in poor families have goals and aspirations for their children.

Answers (Research Supported):

- 1. 1 or 2 *Explanation:* Every language is rich and full of nuances, used to communicate with complexity. The notion that a "standard" or "formal" version of English is somehow richer and more complex serves to limit expectations for students not coming from white, middle-class backgrounds (Gorski, 2013).
- 2. 1 or 2 *Explanation:* Low-income parents value education just as much as middle-class parents. They know how important it is for their children. They may not be able

to participate in school, due to a variety of factors (Gorski, 2013).

3. 3 or 4 *Explanation:* Low-income parents are attentive and involved in their children's lives. They are as attentive as parents in other social classes (Gorski, 2013).
4. 3 or 4 *Explanation:* Families in poverty work as hard, and sometimes harder, than their middle-class counterparts and are often working multiple jobs for longer hours and for lower wages (Gorski, 2013).
5. 1 or 2 *Explanation:* The incidents of alcoholism are actually higher in wealthier families. Incidents of drug use and abuse are similar across socio-economic groups, but the types of substances used may vary. Those living in poverty have less access to medical care and intervention (Gorski, 2013).
6. 3 or 4 *Explanation:* Poverty-level families have goals and aspirations for their children. They may not have the resources to make those goals come true, or know how to access resources for their children. When provided information about resources and programs, they actively pursue them (Gorski, 2013).

A school staff could take this survey and then graph and share the responses. Any items, which do not have consensus reflecting the research-supported conclusion, could indicate that implicit biases are impacting the education of students coming from poverty. A next task is to begin deeply exploring these biases. We suggest presenting scenarios that staff can use to brainstorm a variety of explanations that stretch and challenge implicit biases. A staff could create a list of scenarios relevant to student populations, which the larger society has implicit biases about, such as immigrant or refugee students, racial or ethnic groups, English language learners, students with disabilities, or LGBTQ students. Following is a set of scenarios

applicable to poor families and students, to begin that process.

Scenarios for Students and Families Impacted by Poverty

1. A student arrives at school, in winter, wearing flip-flops.
2. A parent/guardian comes to school for a conference with alcohol on his/her breath.
3. A student is not doing his/her homework.
4. A parent/guardian does not answer his/her phone, and the voicemail is not set up or full.
5. A student is coming to school hungry.
6. A parent/guardian is reluctant to share about family living situation.
7. A student has recurrent head lice.
8. A parent/guardian does not show up for a report card conference.
9. A student smells bad and is not wearing clean clothes.
10. A student uses words like "aks" for "ask," "don't got none" for "don't have any," and "ain't" for "doesn't."

Each scenario could be posed at a staff meeting, with a challenge to recognize their reactions or responses or judgments of the student or family. What implicit bias is triggered by the statement? Then, individuals, partners, or small groups could brainstorm a variety of explanations for the events, which remove judgment. This can help staff to de-bias or break the habits of prejudice (Godsil, 2015).

Example:

Statement: "A student comes to school on a freezing day in a t-shirt."

Initial reaction: "How could the parents let her leave for school without a coat? Poor kid!" I feel critical of the parents and sympathetic towards the child.

Possible implicit bias: A family that cared about their child would make sure she was wearing a coat on a freezing day.

Other possible explanations:

1. She left her coat at school yesterday, and she was told to go through the lost and found to find it.
2. Her guardian tried to get her to wear a coat, but she refused because she hates her coat.
3. Her parents worked late and weren't up in the morning, so she got herself ready.
4. Someone stole her coat on the way to school.
5. She had a coat and left it at the bus stop while she was playing.
6. Her family doesn't have money for a coat, and they are too embarrassed to say anything.
7. Her family doesn't know about the family-community resource center at school where she can get a coat.
8. Her younger brother lost his coat, so she gave hers to him.

After working through a number of these scenarios, a staff would then be ready to utilize Culture of Hope surveys to begin building consensus on beliefs about students and families and teaching and learning (sample Culture of Hope surveys available online at <http://www.cultureofhope.com/seeds> or in *Building a Culture of Hope* (Barr & Gibson, 2013)). Survey items on which the staff do not have consensus can be discussed in greater depth and any items that trigger implicit biases can now be more effectively discussed based on shared knowledge. In *Building a Culture of Hope* (Barr & Gibson, 2013), we suggest a specific strategy/sequence of events for assessing the seeds of hope. The process begins with creating a team of stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, specialists, parents, students, and community members. The team then proceeds through a sequence of steps to create, analyze, and use survey data as a regular part of school improvement.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on our time with school staffs that are doing the hard work of implementing a Culture of Hope in elementary, middle, and high schools, we cannot stress enough the importance of taking precious time to talk about, examine, and re-visit beliefs about children and their families. Too often, we get overwhelmed with new curriculum, standards, or the latest mandate from state or federal governments. We can forget, in the very real stress and pressure to conform to the expectations of those outside our school walls, that our deepest accountability is to our students and their future lives. With all of the pressures on our schools, it can be problematic if not seemingly impossible to create the time for building a unified vision as a staff. But we know that our efforts for students are amplified many times over when everyone is moving toward the same target. The impact on a child to have one adult who believes in and advocates for him or her is well documented. Imagine the impact when that child has that encouraging experience with every staff member, during every year of school. When teachers, administrators, and support staff work together, they change students' life trajectories. This article hopes to encourage educators to become aware of the value-loaded words they use and investigate those words, to discover the beliefs behind those words, and to examine their own unconscious, implicit biases surrounding poverty. We hope they will then engage their colleagues to do the same, in order to better serve all students. It is only through the difficult process of open discussion that teachers and administrators will come to develop a strong set of shared, core values that are so essential in teaching youth at risk due to poverty.

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